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# Perfect History Weekend

On Martha's Vineyard, two top-tier inns have roots in the past.

BY TOM DRESSER



Old inns intrigue us with their aura of romance and nostalgia. History seeps from beneath their doors, photographs lining the hallways reflect an earlier era, and memories of good times spent there are passed through generations, all honoring a very special past.

Martha's Vineyard is home to many of these fine old hotels, from whaling captain's homes to quaint bed-and-breakfasts. Here are two inns that provide both vintage character and modern creature comforts, giving you a chance to soak up history while you recharge your spirit.

Mansion House, Vineyard Haven, Mass.



Postcard of the Mansion House, c. 1910

## *Mansion House, Vineyard Haven*

Vineyard Haven's Mansion House, one of the island's oldest inns, has risen from the ashes more than once. In 1794, a century after the first tavern was licensed in Vineyard Haven (then known as Holmes Hole), the Mansion House was constructed on the site of an old boardinghouse. With rambling rooms that accommodated a host of visitors, it became a downtown anchor.

One guest in the 1870s, an artist from *Harper's Magazine*, relished the luxury of the inn, writing that it was "as full of comfort, tidiness and snugness as all the old fashioned places are supposed to be." Over the years the hotel was home to small shops and a stable. In the late 19th century, it housed the local weather station and telegraph office.

On August 11, 1883, a disastrous fire spread through town, leveling more than 70 buildings, including the Mansion House. No records from the original inn survived, only a large sign that today hangs over the hotel's indoor pool. Undaunted by the great fire, the hotel's owners, Captain and Mrs. Look, rebuilt their hostelry and it became even more of a centerpiece. Its red-tile roof and a cupola that overlooked the harbor drew the attention of visitors. Interior comforts such as steam heating and telephone service were added.

By the end of the 19th century, seaside resorts gained popularity. Bostonians rode the train to Woods Hole, sailed on the steamer to the Vineyard, and summered in West Chop, many first making a stop at the Mansion House. It was a heady time for the tourist trade.

By the end of World War I, electricity brightened the hotel's rooms. The *Vineyard Gazette* raved in 1922, "This is one of the best known hotels in South Eastern Massachusetts." Yet flames struck again in 1929, damaging 30 rooms. While not as devastating as the first fire, the conflagration caused substantial damage.

After World War II, the hotel was sold to Lee Colter, who rebuilt it and promoted it as the "New Mansion House." Colter boasted of running water in every room, a large sunroom, and piazzas. George C. Woods eventually bought the hotel and promised to make the Mansion House a "permanent mooring, nautically speaking, in Vineyard waters."

Mr. Woods kept his word. The inn was open year round, equipped with a sprinkler system, a television, and a piano in the lobby. Sightseers coming to the Vineyard on tour buses in the 1940s and '50s often stayed at the Mansion House.



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For the Governor of California

(Photo Courtesy of Dukes County Historical Society)



ABOVE: Mattakeset Lodge (1874-1905), a terminus of the railroad, and train in Edgartown. BELOW: The Winnetu today.

*"By the end of World War I, electricity brightened the hotel's rooms."*

In 1985 Sherman and Susan Goldstein purchased the Mansion House, and promptly replaced the decaying cupola. Sherman says, "It always had been the economic engine of Vineyard Haven. In addition to rooms, people come to shops in the complex. It housed the first meteorological site and the first lending library."

Unbelievably, fire struck again in 2001. The hotel was razed, rebuilt to include a health club and indoor pool, and reopened within two years. Then, as today, the view from the cupola of the harbor and downtown is magnificent. Old photographs preserve a feel of history in the hallways, and artifacts fill glass cabinets. A sense of tradition filters through to the present. "We bridge the best of both centuries," says Susan Goldstein. She and her family seem very much at home. "We are involved. We live here," says Susan Goldstein. "This is our home."

